

Cultural concerns stop Loop 202 approval

[By Doug Murphy](#)

December 19, 2007 - 9:42AM

A draft environmental impact statement that shows the South Mountain Loop 202 being built along Pecos Road, cutting through several ridges in South Mountain Park before turning north to reconnect with Interstate 10 near 55th Avenue, has a major problem that is preventing tentative approval by the Federal Highway Administration.

According to Tim Tait, a spokesman for the Arizona Department of Transportation, the problem focuses on cultural resources in South Mountain.

The Gila River Indian Community has repeatedly said that South Mountain is culturally significant to the tribe.

But ADOT's plans call for blasting through several ridges and building a 10-lane, \$1.7 billion freeway from I-10 in Ahwatukee Foothills, west and then north to reconnect with I-10.

But because there has been no agreement between the Gila River Indian Community, ADOT and the Federal Highway Administration on the unspecified cultural sites, federal approval of the draft environmental impact statement is on hold.

"I'm not even going to try to tell you when the document will be on the street," Tait told the South Mountain Citizens Advisory Team last week.

For the eastern leg of the 22-mile-long freeway ADOT has only one choice for routes along Pecos Road and through the mountains. Any alternative that includes construction of the freeway on Indian land requires approval of the Gila River Indian Community, which twice has passed resolutions opposing the freeway on tribal land.

GRIC did give ADOT permission to study the impact that a freeway on Pecos Road would have on tribal land, but that doesn't mean that the tribe is open to a route on their land, Tait said.

"The community, in issuing the permit, was very clear that it didn't alter its position."

Meanwhile, ADOT is working to keep the project moving forward.

"We are evaluating any potential site that has cultural significance," Tait said.

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